Impatiently Waiting

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> Every real project stalls in someone else's queue: a review, a verification, an approval. Impatience gets treated as the flaw, and for people with ADHD the empty wait is close to painful. An evidence-based case for staying impatient and pointing the impatience at a second, bounded piece of work, so the queue becomes a component of the project and not a gap in it, with an honest account of switching costs, attention residue and the bias toward action that cut against it, and a view of what it could look like if more people gave away what they built while they waited.

The wait is part of the work

I have ADHD. I am saying so here because this essay is about waiting, and waiting is where it shows most.

I built a game to launch on Google Play. The game was done before I was allowed to ship it. First there had to be a company. Then identity verification. Then the tax paperwork. Then the store review. None of these steps was unreasonable, and none of them was mine to speed up. Each one was a queue with someone else at the front of it.

While I waited, I sent my games to other gaming websites. They turned them down.

For most of my life, the boredom of a stretch like that would have stressed me out. This time I did something else with the energy. I built my own games site, for fun. It is now gimblegaming.com: more than sixty original browser games, free, no ads, no accounts. I do not care about the money from it. I wanted to give something back, and the queue happened to be where I had the time.

Every project I have run since has had the same shape. A store review. An identity check. An approval from a platform that answers when it answers. The wait used to be the worst part. Now it is the start of the next thing.

That is the argument of this essay. Any project that touches other people has waits built into it, and they will not go away. Patience is the usual advice, and for some people it asks for the one thing the research says comes hardest to them. The better move is to stay impatient and give the impatience a second target: treat every forced wait as a starting gun for a bounded parallel project, so the queue becomes part of the work instead of a hole in it.

The premise

By impatiently waiting I mean four things together.

First, the wait is forced. Someone else holds the next step: a reviewer, a regulator, a platform, a client, a bank. You cannot speed it up by trying harder, and checking on it does nothing. A delay you could fix yourself is not a wait. It is a task you have not done.

Second, the original project is parked on purpose. You write down where it stands, what you are waiting for, and what you will do first when the answer arrives. Then you stop touching it.

Third, the second project is chosen and bounded. It is something you already wanted to make, small enough to reach a usable state inside a wait of roughly the expected length, and it does not borrow from the thing you are waiting on.

Fourth, the first project comes back first. When the queue clears, you return to it, and the second project goes to the same kind of parking spot. The parallel work is allowed to be good. It is not allowed to become the reason the first project never ships.

It is not multitasking, which is switching back and forth inside an hour; this is one switch when a queue opens and one when it closes. It is not busyness for its own sake. And it is not patience in disguise. Patience asks you to feel calm about the wait. This asks you only to stop feeding it.

The first essay in this series, The Ego Death of Society, argued that AI removes the excuse of not knowing how to build something. The second, The Utility of Not Caring, argued that you run a project better when you drop your stake in the verdict. The third, Failing Confidently, found that the people who eventually succeed shorten the gap between attempts. This one is about the gap other people impose on you, and whether it is dead time or working time.

What the evidence says

First, most people would rather do almost anything than wait with nothing to do. Timothy Wilson and colleagues ran 11 studies in which people sat alone in a bare room for 6 to 15 minutes, with no phone and nothing to read, and entertained themselves with their thoughts. Most did not enjoy it. In one study, people were left alone for 15 minutes with a button that gave them a mild electric shock. Twelve of 18 men, 67 percent, and 6 of 24 women, 25 percent, shocked themselves at least once rather than sit with their thoughts (Wilson et al., Science 2014, via University of Virginia). The shock study is small. The direction across the 11 studies is clear: unoccupied time is aversive for most people, not just the impatient.

Second, people want to be busy but need a reason. Christopher Hsee, Adelle Yang and Liangyan Wang gave 98 students a 15-minute gap after a survey. They could drop it off just outside the room and wait, or walk to a drop-off point about a 15-minute round trip away. When the snack at both spots was the same, 68 percent chose to sit. When the far spot offered a different snack, a pretext, 59 percent chose the walk.

The students who stayed busy, whether by choice or by assignment, reported feeling happier (Hsee, Yang and Wang, Psychological Science 2010, via the British Psychological Society; Chicago Booth Review). In this study, busy people were happier, and idle people would not get busy without a justification. A parallel project is one.

Third, people with ADHD discount the future more steeply, and part of it is the wait itself. Across 21 case-control studies and 3,913 participants, people with ADHD chose smaller, sooner rewards over larger, later ones more often than controls, with a medium effect of d = 0.43, consistent across ages and whether the money was real (Jackson and MacKillop, Biological Psychiatry: CNNI 2016). The more telling result is experimental. Rafaela Marco, Edmund Sonuga-Barke and colleagues gave 360 children with ADHD, 349 of their siblings and 112 controls a choice between one point after 2 seconds and two points after 30. In one version, the quick choice also shortened the session; in the other, it did not. Children with ADHD took the quick reward more in both, but the gap was larger when it got them out of the waiting sooner (Marco et al., Neuropsychology 2009). The authors read that as delay aversion: the empty wait is something to escape, separate from wanting the reward now. If the aversion is to empty time, filling the time should help more than willpower.

Fourth, time itself runs differently. A meta-analysis of 55 studies on timing in ADHD found poorer discrimination of very short durations, more variable estimates of intervals of several seconds, and, when people were asked to reproduce a longer interval, a tendency to end it early, which the authors attribute again to delay aversion (Marx et al., Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2021). These are laboratory tasks with intervals of seconds, not weeks, so the claim I take from them is narrow: the research gives reasons to expect an empty wait to weigh more on someone like me, and none to expect the opposite.

Fifth, boredom is a signal to change, and it does not care what the change is. Shane Bench and Heather Lench bored people with repeated neutral images and then let them choose what to look at next. In three experiments with 55, 150 and 145 participants, bored people chose new unpleasant images over more of the same, and in the third study more than 70 percent chose a set different from the one that had bored them (Bench and Lench, Emotion, via PsyPost). Lench's summary is that boredom is a signal "that it's time to shift gears, even if that shift is unpleasant" (EurekAlert). The energy arrives whether you aim it or not.

Sixth, filling the wait changes how it feels more than how long it feels. David Maister's well-known propositions on waiting lines say occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time, and uncertain or unexplained waits feel longer than known, explained ones (Maister, The Psychology of Waiting Lines, as reproduced here). Those are propositions from a consultant's essay, not measurements. When an MIT team tested the idea at a Boston bank branch, with an electronic news board for customers in line, the board made the wait more interesting (from 3.8 to 5.6 on a 10-point scale for waits of 4 to 12 minutes) but did not shorten how long people thought they had waited, and satisfaction rose only by an amount too small to be sure of. Customers overestimated their waits either way: 5.1 minutes perceived against 4.2

actual (Katz and Martin, MIT Sloan thesis supervised by Richard Larson, 1989). One branch and 277 usable answers is thin, but it is a useful correction: occupying the wait made it more interesting without making it feel shorter, and that is the more honest promise.

Seventh, stepping away from a hard problem can help it, if you worked on it first. Ut Na Sio and Thomas Ormerod pooled 117 studies with 3,606 participants on incubation: putting a problem aside before coming back to it. The average effect was positive, 0.29, largest for creative problems with many possible answers. Two details matter here. Longer preparation before the break gave a bigger effect, and filling the break with a highly demanding task gave a smaller one (Sio and Ormerod, Psychological Bulletin 2009). These are lab puzzles with breaks of minutes, not launches with breaks of weeks. Still, the shape matches: work the first project, park it, come back, and do not let the filler swallow you.

Eighth, people are optimistic about timelines they are inside of. Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin and Michael Ross asked 37 students when they would finish their senior theses. The average estimate was 33.9 days; the average "if everything goes as poorly as it possibly could" estimate was 48.6. The average actual was 55.5 days. Fewer than half finished even by their own worst case. In a later study in the same paper, 123 observers predicting other people's deadlines erred in the opposite direction, guessing too long (Buehler, Griffin and Ross, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 1994). The study is about people's own work, so I am extending it, but the lesson for forced waits is direct: distrust your own estimate of when a queue clears, and plan for the wait instead of assuming it away.

And there is a long-run reason to try more than one thing. Lu Liu, Dashun Wang and colleagues traced the careers of 2,128 artists, 4,337 film directors and 20,040 scientists. Hot streaks, the bursts of a career's best work, tended to begin after a period of exploring different styles or topics followed by a period of focusing on one. That sequence made the start of a hot streak more likely than at a random point in a career by 20.5 percent for artists, 13.8 percent for directors and 19.2 percent for scientists. Exploration alone did nothing. Focus alone did nothing (Liu et al., Nature Communications 2021, via Kellogg Insight). It is observational, and nobody in those data was exploring because a reviewer was slow. But a second line of work is not automatically a distraction from the first, as long as something eventually gets the focus.

Case study: a game, a queue and a second site

This is one person's record, so treat it as a case, not a proof. The same pattern repeats in it: a finished piece of work, a queue I could not move, and a choice about what to do with the time.

The first entry is the game for Google Play. It was ready before the paperwork was. There had to be a company, there had to be identity verification, the tax paperwork had to be done, and then the store had to review it. Known Quantity LLC was formed in October 2026, and the game waited on it. No step had a date I could count on. That is Buehler's thesis students from the other side of the desk: I could not know when the queue would clear, and the research says any guess I made would probably have been early.

The second entry is the rejections. I offered the games to other gaming websites while I waited, and they said no. That is an ordinary outcome. What I did with it is the point. What I felt in the wait looks a lot like the delay aversion in the Marco study and the boredom signal in Bench and Lench, and I had a reason to be busy that Hsee would recognize: the games existed and had nowhere to go. So I built the place for them to go. gimblegaming.com now carries more than sixty original browser games, free, with no ads and no accounts. I built it for fun, and I do not care about the money from it. I want it to give back.

The third entry is everything since. The company now runs a consulting practice, the studio, two clothing labels and these essays, and every project I have run since has had the same pattern of forced waits: a store review, a verification, an approval. In each one I started something new. That is the habit this essay describes, and the reason it is cheap enough to keep is that I build with AI as a partner. It makes starting a bounded second project cheap enough that an ordinary queue is long enough to get it somewhere useful.

Two honest notes. First, nothing in my record exempts me from the costs in the objections below: switching, attention residue and too many open projects apply to me as much as to anyone, and the guardrails later in this essay exist because of them. Second, the case cannot show that the parallel projects made the original ones better. What it shows is narrower: the waits were going to happen either way, and in my case the time in them turned into work I would have wanted to do anyway, instead of stress.

Why waiting is hard, and why redirecting it works

Put the findings together and the mechanism is plain.

An empty wait is aversive for most people, as Wilson's shocks show, and for people with ADHD the aversion is partly to the emptiness itself, which is what Marco's design isolates. The usual advice, be patient, asks a person to change how the wait feels, which is the hardest variable to move.

The aversion produces energy, and Bench and Lench show it goes toward change of any kind. For someone waiting on a review, the nearest change is reopening the thing under review or refreshing the status page. Both feel like action. Neither moves the queue.

Busyness helps only if it has a reason. Hsee's students would walk for a different snack. A project you already wanted to make is a better reason, and it leaves something behind.

Parking the first project properly is what stops it from pulling at you. Masicampo and Baumeister found that unfinished goals produce intrusive thoughts and worse performance on unrelated work, and that writing a specific plan for the goal removed those effects (Masicampo and Baumeister, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2011). A written next step is enough for the mind to let go, even while the wait is unresolved.

And coming back is built into the design from the start. Sio and Ormerod's incubation effect needs preparation first and a return after. Liu's hot streaks need exploration and then focus. In both, the second activity serves the first only if the first gets the attention back.

So the precise thesis is this. You will not make a forced wait shorter, and you probably will not make yourself patient. You can decide what the energy from the wait builds: a bounded second project, with the first parked under a plan and resumed when the queue clears.

Three old versions of the same idea

None of this is new. Three writers got there first, and one of them disagrees.

Seneca wrote On the Shortness of Life about people who spend their lives arranging to live later. His sharpest line is about waiting: "The greatest hindrance to living is expectancy, which depends upon the morrow and wastes to-day." And then: "All things that are still to come lie in uncertainty; live straightway!" (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life, ch. 9). The Stoics came up in the second essay as the people who separated what is up to us from what is not. A store review is plainly not up to us. Seneca's point is that the day spent waiting on it still is. His instruction is to keep today out of the queue.

Pascal took the opposite side, and he deserves a hearing. "All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber" (Pascal, Pensées 139). For Pascal, our constant search for diversion is a way of not looking at our condition, and a person who cannot sit still is running from something. I take the warning seriously. A second project can be a way of not facing the first: the hard bug, the honest review, the thing that is not working. The test is whether you go back.

Kierkegaard, writing as the young aesthete in Either/Or, opens his essay on boredom with "Boredom is the root of all evil" and then proposes a cure he calls the rotation of crops. He rejects the vulgar version, which is endless change of scenery ("One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city"). His method "does not consist in changing the soil but ... consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops." And he adds a line that reads like a guardrail: "The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes" (Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Rotation of Crops). These are the words of a character Kierkegaard sets up to be answered later in the book, not his settled view, but the distinction is useful. Changing fields every time you are bored is the vulgar rotation. Planting a different crop in the same field, within a limit, is the version that feeds you.

What the three share is the tension this essay tries to hold. Do not give the day to the wait. Do not use activity to hide from the work. Rotate the crop, not the field.

How to wait impatiently without making a mess

The evidence does not say start more projects. It says the empty wait is costly, its energy goes somewhere, and switching has a price. Each step below is tied to that research.

Classify the wait before you do anything. Is it forced, with someone else holding the next step, or is it a task you are avoiding? Only the first kind qualifies. Write down what you are waiting for and your guess at when it will clear, then double it. Buehler's students blew through their own worst case.

Park the first project in writing. Three lines: where it stands, what you are waiting for, the first thing you will do when the answer comes. That is Masicampo and Baumeister's plan, and it is what lets the first project stop pulling at you. Then close it. Do not check the queue more than once a day.

Choose the second project before you need it. Keep a short list of things you already want to make. When a wait opens, take the one that fits the expected length. Hsee's students needed a pretext; the list is yours, decided on a calm day, so boredom does not pick for you.

Bound it. It should reach a usable state inside the expected wait, not depend on the first project, and not swallow you. Sio and Ormerod found highly demanding fillers weakened incubation, and the team study in the objections below found performance fell off at the extremes. Kierkegaard's limit applies.

Finish the switch cleanly in both directions. Leroy found that leaving a task unfinished leaves residue that hurts the next one, and that time pressure helped people disengage. So switch at a natural stopping point, with the parking note written. When the queue clears, give the second project its own three-line note before you go back.

Return first, always. The first project gets your attention back the day the answer comes. If you dread the return, that is Pascal's warning; look at why.

Give the second project away when you can. This part is my view, not a finding. A thing built in a gap, for fun, with nothing riding on it, is easy to make free. My games site is that: free because I do not care about the money from it and wanted to give back.

The same habits scale beyond one person.

For a team, put the wait on the plan. Show approvals as time, not a line between two tasks, with an owner and a named second piece of work. Keep a team list of small, worthwhile things that only get built in waits: the internal tool nobody has time for, the documentation, the open-source fix. Make the parking note a team habit so the person who returns is not starting from memory.

For a platform or an institution that runs a queue, tell people how long it will be and why. Maister's propositions say unexplained and uncertain waits feel longer, and the bank study found that a clock improved the accuracy of people's guesses. A store that shows an honest range and the reason for it gives everyone in the queue something to plan the second project around. A platform that wanted to go further could point people in the queue at the open, useful things others built while waiting.

The objections I take seriously

"Switching costs are real. You are just multitasking with extra steps." Switching costs are real. Rubinstein, Meyer and Evans found that every switch between tasks costs time, more for complex or unfamiliar tasks (Rubinstein, Meyer and Evans, Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance 2001, via APA), and Leroy found that an unfinished task keeps a share of your attention

after you leave it (Leroy, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 2009). That is why the definition allows one switch when the queue opens and one when it closes, with a parking note each time. Paying a switching cost twice to use a wait of days or weeks is a different trade from paying it fifty times an afternoon.

"More projects means worse projects." Sometimes, and the evidence says when. In an Italian company's R&D unit, Bertolotti and colleagues found that team performance rose and then fell with the number of teams members belonged to at once, an inverted U (Bertolotti et al., Research Policy 2015). One company is not the world, but the shape is believable. The fix is the bound. One parallel project per wait, and a return rule that always wins.

"Doing something is not always better than doing nothing." This is the strongest objection and it has data. Michael Bar-Eli and colleagues looked at 286 penalty kicks in top competitions. Goalkeepers jumped left or right 93.7 percent of the time. Staying in the center saved 33.3 percent of shots, against 12.6 and 14.2 percent for the jumps. The authors explain it with regret: a goal conceded while standing still feels worse than one conceded while diving (Bar-Eli et al., Journal of Economic Psychology 2007; BPS Research Digest). The lesson for waiting is precise. When the right move on the first project is to do nothing, leave it alone; that is the point of parking it. The bias toward action is what makes people reopen the submission or email the reviewer again. Redirecting the energy to a second project is a way of letting the first one stand still.

"Impatience is expensive. The delay-discounting literature says so." It does. Across 46 studies and 56,013 people, steeper discounting of future rewards went with addictive behavior, a small effect overall ($d = .15$) and a medium one in the better-measured studies ($d = .58$) (MacKillop et al., Psychopharmacology 2011). The argument here is only about where impatience goes. Taking the smaller reward sooner is the costly version: shipping before the review, cutting the corner, quitting the queue. Staying in the queue and building something else is the version that keeps the larger, later reward and still gives the impatience somewhere to go.

"This is an ADHD coping strategy dressed up as advice for everyone." Partly. The delay-aversion and timing findings are about ADHD, and I say so. But Wilson's and Hsee's subjects were ordinary students and adults, and most of them disliked empty time too. The strategy probably matters most to people for whom waiting is hardest. It is not medical advice or a treatment, only a way of organizing work around a fact that applies to nearly everyone and more to some.

"Easy to say when starting a second project is cheap." True, and AI is what makes it cheap for me. A person without that leverage, or with no spare hours, may have nothing to redirect. The smallest version still works: keep the list, write the parking note, and let the second project be a single afternoon. And the institutional part, honest wait times and plans that show the wait, costs the person in the queue nothing.

What to do on Monday

1. List every project you have that is waiting on someone else. For each, write the three-line parking note: where it stands, what you are waiting for, the first step when the answer comes. Then stop checking it more than once a day.
2. Write a short list of things you already want to make, each small enough to reach a usable state in a week or two. Do it today, while nothing is pulling at you.
3. The next time a forced wait opens, start one item from the list that day. One. Write its own parking note before you return to the first project.
4. Decide now that anything you build in a wait can be given away if it is useful to someone, and put it somewhere people can find it.
5. If you run a team, add the waits to the plan as time, with an owner and a named second piece of work. If you run a queue, publish an honest range for how long it takes and the reason.

What the queue could be

This last part is my view, not a research finding.

Most of the waiting in modern work is imposed by institutions: reviews, verifications, approvals, compliance checks, other people's backlogs. Most of those checks exist for good reasons and should stay. My point is that the time inside them is, I think, one of the largest unused resources in working life, held by people who are impatient, with energy and nowhere to put it.

Picture that time treated as usable by default. A developer waiting on a store review builds a small free tool. A team waiting on legal writes the documentation the next team will need. A platform tells everyone in its queue how long it will take, and points them at what other people built while they waited. And a habit forms of giving away the thing you made in the gap, because it cost you nothing extra and someone else can use it.

That is why the games site stays free. I was going to wait either way. I would rather the waiting leave something behind for other people.

Sources and a note on method

Every figure is linked where it appears, to the primary study or the most direct report available. Where a claim rests on one study I say so; where it rests on a meta-analysis I give the number of studies. Some numbers come from a direct report rather than the paper, because the paper was not open to me (Wilson, Hsee, Bench and Lench, Liu, and the Bar-Eli save rates); those link to the report I checked. Several of the studies are in children or in short lab tasks, and I have said where I am extending them to weeks-long waits in adult work.

A few things that are commonly said were left out on purpose because the evidence does not carry them: the claim that multitasking costs 40 percent of productivity (not in the study it is usually attributed to, and I could not find a primary source); the story of the airport that cut baggage complaints by making passengers walk farther (an anecdote, not data); the idea that occupied waits are measurably shorter in the mind (the one field test I could open did not find it); and any suggestion that ADHD is an advantage. My own record is a case of one and is presented as such.

The research brief behind this essay, with a strength-of-evidence rating on every item and the list of claims cut, is available on request. The earlier essays in this series are The Ego Death of Society, The Utility of Not Caring and Failing Confidently.

I used AI to research and draft this, under my direction, with a standing instruction to tell me where I was wrong before telling me where I was right, and every claim was checked against its source before it went in.